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## Homeless Court Works to Help Such People

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SAN DIEGO (AP) - In this courtroom, there is no witness box, no raised bench for the judge. The lawyers and clerks sort through files at folding tables, while dozens of defendants sit in stackable chairs. Homeless court is now in session at the St. Vincent de Paul shelter.

The bailiff is armed, but the public defender tries to put everyone at ease: "There's one assurance: Nobody goes into custody today."

The idea of this court and others like it is to help the homeless clear misdemeanor offenses from their record that, if left unresolved, can make them ineligible for government aid or driver's licenses - a major barrier to a normal life.

Launched at the request of homeless veterans 15 years ago, the San Diego program has grown into a model for cities across California and beyond.

Public defender Steve Binder helped organize San Diego's first homeless court on an outdoor handball court in 1989 to help veterans living on the streets. The program has since expanded to all of San Diego's estimated 8,000 homeless, with monthly sessions now alternating between two shelters. Homeless cannot participate unless they have been referred to the court by a shelter where they have completed recovery and self-help programs. In that way, homeless court becomes one of the final stops on the road back to a self-sustaining life.

Participation in alcohol and drug counseling, job training and other programs is credited toward their penalty, meaning nearly everyone has their case dismissed and fines cleared.

San Diego's program has inspired other homeless courts in Oakland, Ventura, Fresno, Bakersfield, Los Angeles, Orange County, San Bernardino and Sacramento, as well as Albuquerque, N.M., Salt Lake City, and Vancouver, Wash.

For Donna Jones, a 57-year-old former live-in aid worker, the San Diego court session will let her qualify again for a driver's license. She slipped into homelessness earlier this year after her jobs dried up and she sold her car to pay a bill. During the slide, a ticket for illegal use of a car pool lane, compounded by her lapsed car insurance, resulted in an arrest warrant.

The St. Vincent de Paul shelter is helping her get new job skills and build a savings account. With her new training and a driver's license, Jones expects to rebound.

"If you really want to get your life back together, this helps you do it," she says.

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On the Net:

San Diego County Public Defender's Office <http://www.sdcounty.ca.gov/public-defender/>

Vietnam Veterans of San Diego <http://www.vvsvd.net>

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